

Central Intelligence Agency



Washington, D.C. 20505

244 file ②
Source

DIRECTORATE OF INTELLIGENCE

27 February 1985

Yugoslavia: Key Party Plenum Set for 5 March

SUMMARY

The Yugoslav party is on the eve of winding up a wrenching assessment of the system that has split the country along regional and ideological lines. Chances are that it will project a modicum of unity but disputes on major issues will continue. The Army, while remaining on the sidelines, is likely to keep up its open criticism of the ineffectiveness of the party leadership.

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This memorandum was prepared by [Redacted] East European Division, Office of European Analysis. Comments and questions are welcome and should be addressed to [Redacted] Chief, East European Division, Office of European Analysis, [Redacted]

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Introduction

The Yugoslav party on 5 March will hold a plenum designed to conclude a lengthy debate on the post-Tito political system and lay the groundwork for next year's party congress. The plenum was to have been held last December but has been repeatedly postponed because of differences over political and economic issues. Much of the differences have revolved around efforts by Serbia, the country's largest republic, to strengthen national unity by curbing the role of regional power centers. The plenum is likely to adopt a document that will paper over differences, which can be expected to flare up anew in congress preparations and discussions of pending government legislation. The Yugoslav armed forces, openly concerned by the leadership's indecisiveness, will closely monitor developments. [REDACTED]

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Call for Debate

The nationwide party debate was mandated by a plenum last June that criticized weakness and disunity in the party, including its top leadership, and called for a new look at the way the system is run. As the basis for the debate the plenum released a lengthy draft document in July calling for strengthening party unity and implementing agreed-on economic stabilization measures. The plenum said the party should adopt a final version of the document by the end of the year after grassroots debate. [REDACTED]

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The debate that ensued, which has tapered off only in recent weeks, has been as vitriolic as any held elsewhere in the communist world. As a result, the party has had trouble winding it up. In December, when it was supposed to conclude, party Secretary Dimce Belovski acknowledged problems and said the adoption of a document would be shelved until a plenum in January. January passed with no such plenum, and it was not until 12 February that the party Presidium announced the plenum for 5 March. According to media sources, the Presidium considered the "new, expanded text" of the document and said that further work would have to be done on it before the plenum. [REDACTED]

Serbian Push for Reform

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Serbia, a republic that has historically considered itself Yugoslavia's backbone, has played a pivotal role in the debate. Frustrated over the country's growing fragmentation since Tito's death in 1980, the Serbian leadership has put itself behind a political and economic program intended to reduce the power of regional governments. On the economy, a Serbian party plenum last September came out in favor of strictly implementing the economic stabilization measures affirmed in 1983 by the blue-ribbon Kraigher commission (named for the prominent Slovene politician who chaired it), which are designed to increase economic efficiency through the greater use of market forces. If

implemented, these measures would diminish the ability of local elites to control their regions' economies and thus create a basis for an all-Yugoslav market. But thus far there has been only limited progress in implementing specific measures. [redacted]

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The Serbian leadership in other statements has decried the weakening of the central government and called for unspecified changes in the Constitution to make the system work better. It has also demanded greater unity in the party by enforcing democratic centralism, a principle whose implementation would subordinate regional party committees to higher-level decisions. [redacted]

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The Serbian leadership has also tried to exploit the debate to reassert Serbia's control over its two provinces, Kosovo and Vojvodina, both of which have enjoyed semi-autonomy in recent years. At a republic plenum last November, Serbia pushed through a tough final document complaining about its inadequate control over the provinces and calling for new laws that would be applied uniformly throughout the republic. [redacted]

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Serbia has also taken practical steps to carry forward its aims. On the federal level, it seems to have inspired a recent Constitutional Court decision that could tighten central control over foreign exchange. Within the republic, it pushed through a law on private farming over the objections of Vojvodina. Serbia also may be taking steps to cut the say of its provinces in federal planning and to control more tightly its economic aid to Kosovo. [redacted]

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Some Support

The Serbian program has elicited sharply divided reactions from the other regions. Montenegro and Macedonia, less-developed republics that have traditionally allied with Serbia on questions of federal unity, have been the most supportive. The Montenegrin party leader, at a republic party plenum in December, took public stands similar to that of Serbia when he called for measures against regionalism in the party and "confederalism" in the country. His Macedonian counterpart, at a republic plenum in January, urged the implementation of reforms to promote Yugoslav economic unity, albeit in more restrained language than that coming from some Serbian leaders. Montenegrin and Macedonian support for Serbia has been less than vigorous in recent months, perhaps because the Serbs have pushed ahead so aggressively with their campaign. [redacted]

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Widespread Resistance

The three other republics and Serbia's two provinces have responded with varying degrees of public resistance to what they perceive as an assault on regional rights. The Bosnia-Herzegovina party boss at a republic plenum in December called

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for "harshly settling accounts" with demands for "changing the constitutional foundations" of the system and the country's federal character, such as those allegedly made by the Serbians. The Slovene party head, at a plenum in that republic in December, similarly attacked "centralist" pressure and efforts to replace consensus decisionmaking with majority voting. Such a move, advocated publicly during the debate by some Serbian leaders, would strip the regions of a veto power. Croatian leaders have also spoken out against unwarranted constitutional changes. [redacted]

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These republics seem to have mixed motives in resisting the Serbian-backed measures. Slovenia and Croatia, the two richest republics, have long resisted federal economic controls out of concern the government would give priority to the economic development of poorer regions for political reasons. They may suspect that Serbian centralist aspirations lie even behind efforts to strengthen enterprise decisionmaking authority at the expense of the republics. Croatian and Bosnian ideological hardliners, meanwhile, appear concerned about any measures that might weaken party control. During the debate they have demanded a tougher line on dissidents and the media, two areas on which the Serbian leadership has been relatively lenient. [redacted]

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Serbia's provinces have reacted angrily to the Serbian threat to their autonomy, producing some of the worst intra-republic polemics since similar Serbian moves following the 1981 Kosovo ethnic disorders. The Kosovo party head, speaking at a provincial plenum in January, declared that efforts to limit the provinces' autonomy have caused "anxiety and nervousness" and were "not in line with the constitutional system." At a Vojvodina plenum the same month, a high official called such efforts "ill-conceived and unacceptable" and the party boss warned of growing centralist tendencies. Differences continued, but in more muted form, at a Serbian plenum later in January. [redacted]

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Army Concerns

The military so far has refrained from taking sides in the political debate, but there are growing signs that the Army is sensitive to current political strains. [redacted]

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Military leaders probably fear that the growing intractability of the political debate threatens to undermine the strength and unity of the Army and that deepening political rifts

could eventually tempt Army officers to align with the political interests of their home regions--a situation the generals could not accept. [REDACTED]

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While renewing their criticism of party disunity and inertia, Defense Secretary Mamula and the Army party chief Jovicic warned a plenum of the Army party organization on 14 December that some elements within the military held "radical" and "unacceptable" views that the Army could not tolerate. The warning apparently was intended to caution civilian politicians that their indecision and quarreling were encouraging sentiment in some military circles favoring a return to the more authoritarian policies of the Tito era. [REDACTED]

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Soviet Position

Moscow has shown support for greater centralization and party discipline in its coverage of the debate. Two Pravda articles cited favorably pro-centralist Yugoslav statements while ignoring other comments on the need to respect regional rights. A report on the debate on 11 December quoted warnings from low-level party organizations and the Serbian daily Politika about an "excessive decentralization of economic life" and threats to democratic centralism in the party. A Belgrade dispatch on 26 December exaggerated Slovene and Croatian support for greater centralism in the party by citing selectively from statements from plenums in those republics. [REDACTED]

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Outlook

The debate seems headed for an anticlimatic finish. The March plenum document will probably reflect the stalemate that exists among the factions. The party has missed a chance to pull itself together. Differences are likely to be carried over into preparations now begun for next year's party congress, which is unlikely to recommend sweeping changes. The party may endorse some of the less partisan proposals aired in the debate, such as extending terms of office, encouraging multiple candidate elections, and even streamlining the unwieldy party Presidium. The Serbian leadership, meanwhile, will try to push its case in discussions of pending government legislation, such as on the foreign exchange system. [REDACTED]

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The Army will likely watch political events from the sidelines, allowing the politicians to take the initiative in the debate, but it will continue to criticize the political leadership and party disarray. For the time being, however, Army leaders will probably concentrate most of their energies on keeping discipline within their own ranks. [REDACTED]

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